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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

President Begaye Updates Sen. Udall on San Juan River Contamination

SHIPROCK—Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye and Vice President Jonathan Nez met with Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) today and spoke about the aftermath of the Gold King Mine breach that occurred on August 5.

Attorney General Ethel Branch, Speaker LoRenzo Bates, delegates Tom Chee and Amber Crotty, and chapter officials Duane Yazzie and Gilbert Harrison were also in attendance.

President Begaye said the immediate concern was providing water to ranchers and farmers due to the BIA decision to remove water tanks from the entire region.

“Our ranchers and farmers still need water and that’s our concern,” President Begaye said.

The BIA crews and equipment are scheduled to demobilize by Sunday.

The San Juan River has been reopened for irrigation at Nenanezad, San Juan, Upper Fruitland, and Gadiiahi. The river remains closed for Hogback and Shiprock.

“We need a mobile lab unit to test the water

and soil here in the Northern Agency. The EPA also needs to continue providing water tanks,” President Begaye said. “We are requesting that BIA carryover funds to be transferred to Navajo Nation to continue providing water to our people.

“We need construction of a water reservoir for a 90-day supply of water, in case this happens again. Our farmers must also be compensated immediately,” he added.

President Begaye will testify and attend scheduled congressional hearings in Washington, D.C. on the EPA disaster to advocate for the Navajo farmers and ranchers impacted by the spill.

Vice President Nez said there is still no word from the White House since the spill occurred last month.

“President Obama and FEMA need to be more proactive and declare this as a disaster area,” Vice President Nez said. “The Navajo Nation should have the affected tribal lands designated as its own EPA region. There’s less confusion that way.”

The damages from the spill are not only monetary losses.

“The emotional trauma and heartbreak is not being taken into consideration. It’s very heartbreaking,” said Yazzie.

Shiprock Navajos affected by the spill that do not have the means to haul water and hay must also be taken into consideration, he said.

Bates said that he farms alfalfa and typically produces more than 1,300 bales of hay to get through the winter.

“I’ve been 18 days without any water until the system opened back up. My moisture loss is down eight inches. That’s significant,” Bates said.

He estimated a loss of \$8,000 before the start of the winter season.

Sen. Udall said he is going to continue working with the OPVP to meet the needs of the people.

“We’ve done a number of things: scheduling the hearings and getting Administrator McCarthy out here immediately. She was out here within a week,” Sen. Udall said. “The spiritual and

emotional toll is very important.

“The agencies, instead of being bureaucratic, need to be understanding,” he added.

Sen. Udall joined President Begaye and Vice President Nez for a visit to the farm of Earl and Cheryl Yazzie, residents of Shiprock.

The Navajo couple farms corn, melons, and squash. Despite hand watering their crops, the have lost this year’s harvest because of the lack of water. Watermelons that should have been full size by now fit in the palm of his hand.

“I’ve worked on this farm my whole life, it was handed down to me. There’s a lot of corn that we lost. My wife takes it real hard,” Yazzie said.

President Begaye and Dr. Donald Benn, executive director of Navajo EPA, will testify at the House Science, Space and Technology hearing in Washington, D.C. on Sept. 9, from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.

